

The distinction of Law and Gospel as hermeneutical perspective on Scripture

What is Biblical hermeneutics?

What is hermeneutics and why is it relevant to Lutheran theology?

The word comes from Greek ἑρμηνεύς, *hermēneús*, meaning an interpreter. “Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation”, writes Milton S. Terry.¹ It describes and analyses the principles we use in interpreting a text. Hermeneutics is the study of the process by which we figure out the meaning of a text. The term hermeneutics can also mean the methods and principles of interpretation.

This may sound complicated, but in fact hermeneutics studies something everyone is familiar with. We are practicing Biblical interpretation every time we hear or read the sacred text. We do not need advanced knowledge of hermeneutics to understand the Bible. It is perfectly possible to correctly apprehend the meaning of a Bible text without even knowing the word hermeneutics.

Biblical hermeneutics, then, is the study of how we do this: understand and interpret the Bible. It is the study of the principles we use to find out the meaning in a Biblical text and apply it. The term hermeneutics can also mean the methods and principles of interpretation themselves. We may therefore also speak of, for example, the distinction of Law and Gospel as a hermeneutical perspective.

Why is hermeneutics needed? Because we do not always understand what we read, like the Ethiopian eunuch who could not understand the prophecy of Isaiah before Philip interpreted it to him. Human beings can also misinterpret the Bible, and they often do. Why else would we have such divisions in Christendom? Very often theological differences go back to hermeneutical differences. Different ways of interpreting Scripture produce different doctrines and different theologies. A correct hermeneutics, a correct way of interpreting and applying the Bible, is vital. The Book of Concord names the distinction of Law and Gospel as a brilliant light that serves to the end that the Scriptures may be properly understood and interpreted—you will hear more about this shortly.

Let us take a closer look at the process of Scriptural interpretation. We believe that the Biblical text already has a meaning in itself. The process is not text + interpreter using hermeneutical methods = meaning. Rather, it is finding out correctly the meaning already present in the text.

However, we might speak about “meaning” in two different ways: 1) what the text in itself contains and 2) how it applies to us. The content of the Bible is unchanging. Yet this unchanging content can be applied in ways that are as numerous and ever-changing as the situations themselves. In my understanding, hermeneutics deals with both of these.

Let me illustrate. “There is no God besides me”, says the Lord in the Bible. The meaning is clear and simple. Yet for one person, this may mean: “I should not be so obsessed with money.” For another, in a mission field in Africa, it may mean: “I don’t need to be constantly afraid of the spirits any more”. One meaning in the text, but two widely different applications. Hermeneutics is about both finding out the timeless meaning of the text and applying it to the present situation correctly. This is what it means to “properly divide” the Word of God. This is also what it means to properly distinguish Law and Gospel.

One useful way we could look at hermeneutics is identifying the questions we are asking the text. If we ask the wrong questions, we may get the wrong answers or no answer at all. For example, if I am reading the Law of Moses in Leviticus, where it details the numerous feasts, sacrifices etc., but I am looking for an answer to the question “How can I be saved”, I might come to the wrong conclusion. I might start to think

¹ Biblical Hermeneutics, page 17.

that I have to keep the ceremonial law in order to be saved. But the text is not meant to answer this question! So it is important we are asking the text the right questions, the ones it was meant to answer. We will get back to this when we take a closer look at the way the distinction of Law and Gospel is used to interpret Scripture. First, however, it is edifying to take a look at general hermeneutical principles in Lutheranism.

Lutheran hermeneutical principles

As Lutherans, our hermeneutical principles, the ways we use to interpret the Bible, must be based on the Bible itself. Lutherans believe in *Sola Scriptura*—along the proper distinction between Law and Gospel it is the first hermeneutical principle. This means we cannot impose on the Bible any hermeneutical principles that come from outside of it.

There are many passages in the Bible that tell us what the Scripture is like. These inform the way we interpret it.

First, the Bible is inspired. “All scripture is inspired by God” (*theopneustos*) (2 Tim. 3:16 NRS). Following from this, the Bible is true and trustworthy. “Your word is truth”, says Christ to His Father (John 17:17). It says in Psalm 119: “The entirety of Your word is truth” (Ps. 119:160 NKJ)

Based on these and similar passages we believe the Bible to be inerrant. This means we cannot accept interpretations that would make the Bible to be in error.

From the fact that the Bible is inspired and truthful follows that Scripture cannot contradict itself.

This is especially relevant when dealing with more obscure Bible passages such as visions. By the way, the Bible itself makes it clear some parts of it are harder to understand than others: Peter writes in his second epistle that some parts of Paul’s letters are hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16), so we are not going beyond the Bible in saying this. More ambiguous passages should not dictate the interpretation of clear ones. We have to interpret the harder to understand passages on the basis of ones that are easier to understand. Because the Bible is inspired, it interprets itself; we may trust that all of it teaches the same truth and therefore use different parts of it to help us understand other parts.

However, even seemingly contradictory passages must be accepted as they are, if this is the obvious meaning of the text. Otherwise we are in danger of imposing human reason on divine realities (putting reason over God’s Word). (With this sort of reading, we might lose central doctrines like Trinity or the two natures of Christ.) There is a certain tension with the previous principle, but not an unsolvable one.

The character of the text in question must also be taken into account. Is it a historical narrative? A parable? A vision? Letting the Bible interpret itself means taking the text seriously on all levels and letting it dictate how it is to be interpreted. God did not give us a list of disconnected verses. Instead He gave us a collection of writings in human language, so we must respect and take into account the medium in which divine revelation comes to us. Related to this, cherry-picking verses out of context is also contrary to the way God has given us His revelation.

We may briefly note that use of means such as logic and knowledge of languages is not contrary to *Sola Scriptura*. Pieper discusses this in his *Christian Dogmatics*. In giving His revelation through human language God also made it subject to those rules that govern human communications. What I mean by this is that the Scriptures are written in a human language, employing the regular ways language is used, and this has to be taken into account in their interpretation.

The principle of *Sola Scriptura* means that correct interpretation of Scripture cannot depend on tradition (in an absolute sense; in practice right teaching of the Church is very important). It is also against such use of reason which places reason above the Bible, or setting Christian experience above the Bible, etc.

In addition to passages about the qualities of Scripture, another source of hermeneutical principles in the Bible is the way Christ and the Apostles interpret Scripture. We have numerous passages in the NT where Jesus uses the OT to teach people. In the Epistles we have many applications of OT Scripture to the NT Christians. In addition to direct quotations, there are a lot of allusions to Scripture. All of these provide us with information about the correct way to use and interpret Scripture, because Christ and the Apostles show us an example of inerrant, inspired interpretation of Scripture.

Law and Gospel as a hermeneutical perspective on Scripture

“Anything that preaches concerning our sins and God’s wrath, let it be done how or when it will, that is all a preaching of the Law. Again, the Gospel is such a preaching as shows and gives nothing else than grace and forgiveness in Christ”. (FC SD V 12, Concordia Triglotta) I will assume we are all familiar with at least the basics of the proper distinction of Law and Gospel, so we can move on to how it can be construed as a hermeneutical perspective on Scripture. (I will occasionally use the shorthand Law—Gospel hermeneutic in this presentation.)

First: what is the motivation behind distinguishing Law and Gospel? The grace of God is always first. No human effort can take its place and no demand may replace the promise. Our salvation is grounded in Christ’s saving work. It is grounded only in God’s unconditional grace, in His undeserved forgiveness, in the love God showed to the fallen, sinful world by sending His only begotten Son. I do not save myself but Christ saves me. Nothing should be allowed to threaten this. This is the motivation behind the distinction of Law and Gospel. So the interpretive paradigm of Law and Gospel is not rooted only in particular Bible passages but rather the whole shape and dynamic of our faith.

“Law and Gospel” is not just where the words Law, Gospel or grace appear. We could say that everything in the Bible that deals with our need of deliverance and with our salvation has to do with Law and Gospel.

Another Biblical basis for the distinction between Law and Gospel are the numerous passages, especially in Paul’s letters, that speak about the distinction between merit and grace, works and faith, law and faith, human effort vs divine grace or election etc.

The distinction between Law and Gospel is not mechanistic

The Bible can be divided into Law and Gospel, but not in a mechanistic way. Some passages are clearly Law, like the 10 commandments or “wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). Others are clearly Gospel: “Jesus Christ is the propitiation ... for the sins of the whole world.” (John 2:2 ESV) Yet many passages can be applied as both. Let us take the crucifixion of Christ as an example. It is Law in that it shows us the horrible consequences of sin. In the Book of Concord it says, “Yea, what more forcible, more terrible declaration and preaching of God’s wrath against sin is there than just the suffering and death of Christ, His Son?” (FC SD V 12) It shows us the punishment mankind deserves and thereby the greatness of our own sin. At the same time, however, the crucifixion is the purest Gospel, because it is not *me* hanging on the cross, but Christ, for the atonement of my sins. On the cross I see the love and forgiveness of God.

Law and Gospel really is about the applications of Scriptural truth, not so much about putting Bible verse in two piles, one of which contains Gospel and the other one Law. In the beginning, God created heaven and earth. Is this Law or is this Gospel? It can be both, in that it can serve as a reminder of the majesty of God for sinner, but it can also serve as a reminder that “our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth”. (Ps. 124:8)

Especially for this reason it is proper to speak of Law and Gospel as a hermeneutical perspective or an interpretive principle of Scripture. This is also in line with what the Book of Concord says, “As the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is a special brilliant light, which serves to the end that God’s Word may be rightly divided, and the Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles may be properly explained and understood”. (FC SD V 1) The distinction between Law and Gospel is about properly dividing the Word of God to its hearers.

Important questions

Previously I mentioned that hermeneutics can be characterised by the questions we are asking when dealing with the text. Which questions are asked when we view the sacred text through the distinction of Law and Gospel? I will present some, however these are by no means the only ones.

Distinction of Law and Gospel helps answer the question of salvation

A fundamental question is “how am I saved”? It is a very Biblical question to ask while reading Scripture, because “these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (Jn. 20:31 ESV) Also, Paul writes to Timothy that, “the sacred writings ... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus”. (2 Tim. 3:15 ESV)

The proper distinction between Law and Gospel in Lutheran theology is meant to safeguard the right answer to the question of salvation.

“How am I saved” would seem to mostly point us towards the Gospel, as the answer is, “by Christ”. Salvation comes through the redemptive work of Christ our Saviour, as a free gift of God. This—or rather, He—is the essence of the Gospel. The Gospel is that which tells us about Christ, the Saviour of humankind.

However, the question of salvation also always implies that we *need* to be saved. This is the territory of Law. The Law shows us our need for salvation. So both Law and Gospel are already present in this question, and implicitly the Law precedes the Gospel-answer.

Saved from what into what?

A question deriving from “How am I saved” is “what am I saved *from*?” and “what I am saved *into*?” The Bible speaks of this in a multitude of ways. From old to new, from sin to forgiveness, from under the Law to under grace, from ignorance to true knowledge, from darkness to light etc. We could say that everything in the Bible that deals with these distinctions speaks about the distinction of Law and Gospel.

That which tells us about the sad state of human beings from which they are saved is Law. It shows sin and sin’s consequences, like death. We are saved from these through Christ. Yet our salvation is not just release from bad consequences of sin. It is also the blessedness we enjoy as children of God. Everything in the Bible that speaks about the blessings we enjoy as children of God now and in the future is Gospel.

(Of course, even here there is a potential for what could be called a reverse application. The descriptions of sin’s temporal and eternal consequences highlight the greatness of God’s grace towards us, which belongs in the domain of the Gospel. The description of the eternal blessedness of believers shows unbelievers what they lack, which serves as a call to repentance.)

Distinction of Law and Gospel clarifies what God demands and promises

Another pair of questions we can use to characterize Law—Gospel hermeneutics is “What does God demand and what does He promise?” These are also very Biblical questions; the Bible is full of both God’s promises and demands. What God demands is the Law, and what He promises is the Gospel.

In revealing what we should do, the Law also reveals the gap between what we are and what we should be. In other words, it shows us our sin and need of grace. Thus it makes us continually pray: “Lord have mercy.”

The distinction between Law and Gospel gives us a right mind set for looking at these demands. It shows us the part “mercy” in the prayer “Kyrie eleison, Lord have mercy”.

Distinction of Law and Gospel helps point us to Christ

Another angle from which we may look at Law and Gospel as a hermeneutical perspective on Scripture is that everything in Scripture points to Christ. The Scriptures themselves give us this important principle of interpretation: “they testify about me”, Christ said about the Scriptures to the scribes. (John 5:39) We also remember how he interpreted the Bible to His two disciples on the road to Emmaus: “Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted for them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures. (Lk.

24:27 CSB) The entire Bible is about Jesus. So a correct question to ask is always: How does this passage in the Bible point me to Christ?

With Law and Gospel, the Law points us to Christ by showing us our need for a Saviour. The Gospel points us to Christ by showing us Christ as our Saviour. Much more could be said, but I must move on. I trust that you are all familiar with this principle.

Law and Gospel, ethics and the Creed

We can also arrive at the Law—Gospel dynamic from the question of how to live a God-pleasing life as His creatures. By examining what it is to be truly human we are led from fallen creation to redemption and sanctification.

The question “How should I live according to God’s will” is a very common human questions that stem from creation. Even in fallen man there is a longing to God and living right, even though it is spoiled by sin and cannot save man outside of God’s grace.

This longing inevitably carries with itself recognition of the Fall. Sin poisons even our best efforts to live right. No matter how much we try, God cannot be reached through our works and we cannot achieve perfection. This is Law. Without faith it is impossible to please God, tells the epistle to Hebrews. (Hebr. 11:6) (It is interesting to note that Christian apologists in the first centuries called Christianity *verissima philosophia*, the most true philosophy, because it alone instead of all the philosophical ways of life in the ancient world enabled men to know the truth and truly live a God-pleasing life.)

This process leads man to God’s gifts; the Law drives us to God’s grace in Christ. God offers us His grace before and without our works and even in spite of them, as there is much evil in them. He offers us faith in Christ, who alone is perfect, and who has borne our iniquities. Through His Spirit, He gives us all His gifts of grace and creates faith in us. This is Gospel.

This viewpoint anchors Law and Gospel in a credal framework. The Creed has three parts. The first one concerns creation, the second redemption and the third sanctification. This inquiry takes us to the core of Christian theology.

Law and Gospel is not an isolated piece of theological trivia. Instead it can be linked to the great story of creation, redemption and sanctification that structures our creed.

Distinction of Law and Gospel is a pastoral (seelsorgerlich) principle

Law and Gospel is ultimately a principle of pastoral care or *Seelsorge*. The FC states that Law and Gospel need to be properly distinguished, “in order that these two doctrines may not be mingled with one another, or a law be made out of the Gospel, whereby the merit of Christ is obscured **and troubled consciences are robbed of their comfort**, which they otherwise have in the holy Gospel when it is preached genuinely and in its purity, and by which they can support themselves in their most grievous trials against the terrors of the Law.” (FC SD V 1, emphasis mine) The distinction of Law and Gospel is a pastoral perspective on Scripture. How is the Word of God to be rightly divided to this individual? What does this particular soul need?

This way of applying Law and Gospel proceeds from the goal of the soul’s eternal blessedness. We could also say that the goal is a balanced spiritual life, which ultimately leads safely to the heavenly home.

This is achieved by dealing with the problem of sin, for sin is what separates us from God and causes all our spiritual ailments.

What commandments of God are applicable to the situation, and does the person in question need to hear about them at present? Which promises of God are applicable, and will the person benefit from being reminded of them? How can the person be helped to

This is an extraordinarily deep and rich topic, which takes a lifetime to learn in constant guidance of the Holy Spirit, so we must necessarily only scratch the surface here. But I want to make clear that applying God's word to a person's present needs, whether done by a pastor or anyone else, is at the heart of the Law—Gospel hermeneutics.